

Local Artists as Change Agents in Public Health

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ABSTRACT

Local artists possess a unique ability to address complex public health issues within their communities. Acting as observers and communicators, these artists offer creative solutions to tackle health disparities, foster community engagement, and challenge existing narratives around public health concerns. This paper examines the potential of local artists as partners in public health initiatives, highlighting their roles in advocacy, community empowerment, and collaboration with public health stakeholders. Through case studies of successful interventions, it demonstrates how artistic expression can mobilize communities, facilitate dialogue, and contribute to meaningful health outcomes. The challenges and opportunities facing local artists in public health are also discussed, along with recommendations for future collaborations.

Keywords: Local artists, Public health, Community engagement, Health disparities, Artistic advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

Local artists and creative approaches are important tools to address the complex issues that lead to poor health in communities. Utilizing the creativity of local artists in identifying and addressing public health concerns makes sense. They are often in a position to know what the big, underlying issues are in their communities and can help define and champion new solutions. Local artists are also often the passionate and engaged community members that may wish to lead a new project, fill a gap in their neighborhood, or work together to solve a problem. As agents of social change, they offer innovative approaches for new and inclusive public health practices. This review will examine two of the main artist roles identified in our interviews: artists as observers and artists as communicators. We will conclude with some efforts that are currently underway to provide a local home for these general concepts and to support local initiatives that work with artists in these roles [1, 2]. The goals of this paper are to lay the groundwork for the many roles that local artists play in public health work and practice. We also invite the public health and arts communities to build on this work while looking at the roles of local artists in public health. First, we do this by presenting and discussing concepts in the context of some real art in public health practice. We will define the debate and invite readers to contemplate the potential consequences of such an approach. Public health work incorporates a wide-ranging spectrum of possible missions and disciplines. Public health agencies and practitioners are increasingly aware of the need to engage and collaborate all of our community assets to achieve public health outcomes that acknowledge broad-based determinants of health. Art, in its many forms, can be a powerful communication tool, as well as a liberation tool for many constituents, and is being sought out as a universal language that may connect the left and right side of our brains for the sake of a greater common health. Art can also be associated with innovative tactics that we need to engage a relatively apathetic public in discussions about chronic disease prevention and other public health concerns that they cannot necessarily see a direct personal link to. Public policy, in particular, is often portrayed more effectively via artistic vehicles. Creating the spaces and time for participants from different sectors and different cultures to stop, reflect, and appreciate new perspectives is often the most rewarding approach to mobilizing and impacting the community that we serve [3, 4]. Art also provides a constructive way to expand our pool of partners in community health improvement

work, increase the positive image of public health, and engage more artists from different cultural backgrounds. Engaging a diverse group of individuals now is crucial for building initial investment in the process and having and expanding the pool of potential declarative successes that our media and local residents can learn about and connect with [5, 6].

The Role of Local Artists in Public Health

Local artists increasingly contribute to the health and well-being of communities and larger populations in many multifaceted ways. They are both experts in and possess the capacity to leverage their art form to draw attention to critical health issues. They are also well positioned to generate community dialogue around health and social challenges by using their talents to express trauma, fears, and successes. Art, as a tool in the public health toolbox, has become a close ally and offers realistic, immediate, and strategic contributions to local as well as national public health systems and non-governmental health-oriented organizations. It allows people to express significant values, responses, and offers insights, interpretations, and activities that can foster and buttress efforts to maintain and improve the conditions under which people live, work, learn, and grow. Health prompts in art provoke emotions. Carried through narrative and symbolism, the health prompt increases in influence. The cathedral becomes the open heart [7, 8]. Artistic expression has been used for centuries to advance themes of importance in the public domain, from raising awareness about social issues like hunger, poverty, war, and genocide to denouncing fascist ideology. In the public health realm, artists employ their talents as one of the necessary and alternative communication systems directed at community residents, public and private leaders, and in some cases, the medical community. They contribute to an existing, rich, and sometimes contentious lattice of meanings and discourses embedded in the milieu of all public health activity. Each work communicates an understanding not only about our own individual and collective health, our lived lives, and those of others not among our number but also about our experience as a people, our values, and our cultural expectations. It is worth noting the fact that there exist many artists, many agencies, many NGOs, and many other communities that are "disasters" in the sense of the absence of health sovereignty. Think of the recent war-torn countries. Their stories are not told in art because they cannot afford to commission artists, and if they do, it won't find buyers. Their communities are not disasters because they lack artists; their communities are disasters because they are poor. That is why then art becomes a tool of the public health story line at home, to recount the untold stories of those countries that cannot commission art, the stories of the "other" within the privileged countries [9, 10].

Advocacy Through Art

Historically, artists have had a long tradition of advocating for marginalized communities, raising awareness around social and political issues, and demanding change. From public murals that channel rage following tragic events to entire plays and musicals that narrate the devastation of crises, the power of the arts to tell a story and demand action is undeniable. Street artists use humor and cheekiness to address public health concerns, and spoken word poets, stand-up comedians, and photographers are also vocal in advocating for public health issues [11, 12]. Efforts have found innovative ways to employ art to depict individual experiences with mental health, while entire art movements have been dedicated to grieving. Though not employed at the same frequency or scale as advertising, the integration of art into public health campaigns is becoming more widespread. In recent years, campaigns centered in the arts have raised awareness and advocated for change around a variety of health issues from the fodder of viral social media campaigns to paintings about violence. These emotional messages can be more effective than key messages and data alone. In fact, vaccination rates have increased in some sites when community patients who are well-liked have advocated for vaccines. Art campaigns can make a message highly visible, stimulate discussions about public health issues, change social norms as well as individual behaviors, and mobilize communities. However, maximally effective communication about a health issue may require more than one medium; one imagines a video combined with images, audio, and installations. Silent films literally and figuratively set the stage for the kind of character study that is possible with art [13, 14]. Artists are storytellers, and like public health professionals, they can package data for greater impact. The idea to collaborate with artists emerged after learning in local health department advisory committee meetings that the county chronic disease task force was interested in having their message come out in unique and amazing ways to get it higher up on people's to-do lists. Advantages of partnering with artists include increased reach and exposure for the message, the possibility that art may be more compelling to different audiences (including those that are not initially interested in public health), and the ability for an artist from a certain region to capture the nuances of the culture and voice that region's public health problem. Moreover, it has the psychological distancing effect that expands the audience appeal without diminishing the relevance for those immediately affected by the issue. Collaborations can

also lead to local media coverage that may not otherwise have occurred, making the message visible to a larger public [15, 16].

Community Engagement and Empowerment

Local artists create opportunities for community engagement and inclusion. Artists create catalysts and aesthetic materials to stimulate communal dialogue, discussion, and collaboration. They create inclusive platforms that invite community participation. Using art in public spaces solicits input from a range of participants; people are excited to tell their stories in different ways and to be a voice in the community. The needs and desires of all interested parties are included in the final art piece. Engaging the community empowers people to take control and ownership of their own health and wellness. Participating in a meaningful art project can connect people across socio-economic and educational strata; this shared experience helps to break down barriers, reduces feelings of isolation, and fosters meaningful connections that can last long after the project is complete. Collaborative art can serve as a valid human need to connect with others. Community artworks imbue public spaces and shared objects with communal collaboration and ownership [17, 18]. The people and the stories behind the art make it hard to negate. Artists create unique, culturally and linguistically intelligent images, sounds, buildings, gardens, and symbols, letting people know what this place has been, what it is today, and what it may become. Art is a voice that can bridge gaps between factions; it can often express what people fear to discuss. Art serves as a springboard for dialogue and understanding among differing populations; once completed, the art becomes social leverage to effect positive social change. The public act of creating or presenting art can serve to enrich society and impact social issues, such as the promotion of health [19, 20].

Case Studies of Successful Collaborations

The idea that artists are partners in public health efforts is not always familiar. However, the arts as a vehicle of change are a concept deeply rooted in community-based social marketing and is used to effect behavior change on an individual level. Collaborations between local artists and public health stakeholders have resulted in successes in areas such as community building, program effectiveness, and policy change, such that the inclusion of these types of interventions evaluated in conjunction with other community-based social marketing interventions intended to change behaviors is recommended. The case studies that follow starkly illustrate the many ways in which three local artists used their creative abilities to impact public health in marginalized and minority communities. The three case studies provide detailed accounts of the context in which the artistic interventions were conducted and include a description of the artistic intervention and project objectives. In considering the case studies, it is important to note that although they involve some populations that do not fit the classic definition of diversity by race, ethnicity, and sexual preference, other criteria, such as low income and/or residence in rural areas, place participants in these artistic interventions at increased risk of health disparities and create some level of discomfort in the mainstream community. The documentation and strategic assessment of these case studies have and will further inform future interactions between artists and public health professionals. These case studies validate the importance of collaboration and the inclusion of art as a strategy for creating social change [21, 22].

Challenges and Opportunities for Local Artists in Public Health

Artists who seek to contribute to the field therefore face several barriers to their acceptance, from a lack of special skills and knowledge to inadequate resources at their disposal. If they have programs in place that are similar to typical public health work, public health officials may see artists as unnecessary or redundant, especially if they are major targets of budget cuts or suffer from shortages of time or staff. Public health professionals themselves often have limited recognition or support from the populations within the communities they are trying to affect, so they instead focus their use of resources on the more tangible, concrete causes and consequences of illness and injury. Artists can use these challenges as opportunities, however, by advocating for a strategic role they can play in public health. They can develop a core team of allies to brainstorm projects that address public health goals while welcoming local artists to work as consultants, volunteers, interns, and employees. Since artists have limited time, money, personnel, and resources themselves, public health professionals should provide artists with the skills necessary to navigate grant processes and other forms of bureaucratic paperwork. Stress the importance and value of the arts to public health so that artists can engage in and support the necessary advocacy work and economic impact analysis of the arts. Encourage artists to get involved in their communities to get input on what services to provide through their work [23, 24].

Recommendations For Future Collaborations

Recognize that collaboration is about creating partnerships and should largely be about the benefit to the artist, her community, and the public health issue you wish to address. Relationship building takes time and effort and should be viewed as a long-term process in order to create meaningful, lasting

relationships [1, 25]. Fund arts in health in such a way that what will emerge will be a collaborative, co-created, co-led project where all the key partners have been part of the process to determine the key aims and outcomes [26, 27]. If you're funding a project for a local artist, where they are doing work around health, ask how that artist is going to be educated, trained, or supported in order to increase their understanding of the issues related to the health issue that they want to take on. Because it's not enough to say, "I'm a great artist and I want to do this." They are not educated in health. Panelists advise that local artists, not researchers, should take the lead in initiating creative collaborations with public health. Thus, funder training and technical assistance should focus on artists and art professionals. If public health is the priority, they will learn about how to negotiate those processes [1, 28]. Because of the very nature of the creativity and cultural relevance that the arts and artists can bring to the process, involving the artist and the arts in program planning and evaluation can bring in perspectives not routinely considered in the process. It doesn't mean that artists should write public health policy, but that it's a meaningful contribution to a larger data set that informs policy. Having standing partnerships and preparing artists to be in that role can help policymakers engage consistently with the community [29, 30].

CONCLUSION

Local artists are vital agents of change in public health, offering creative and inclusive approaches to address health disparities and foster community dialogue. By collaborating with public health professionals, artists can enhance communication, raise awareness, and mobilize communities toward better health outcomes. Despite challenges such as limited resources and recognition, the opportunities for meaningful collaborations between artists and public health stakeholders are vast. For these partnerships to thrive, efforts must be made to support artists with education, resources, and long-term investment. Embracing the unique perspectives that art brings to public health practice can lead to innovative solutions and lasting social change.

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